

February 28, 2012

Good Afternoon Co-Chair Senator Gerratana, Co-Chair Representative Urban and distinguished members of the Select Committee on Children.

My name is Noreen A. Bachteler and I come before you today as an individual member of the CT Council on Adoption to speak on Raised Bill. No. 192, An Act Concerning Finalizing Adoptions by the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters.

I reside in West Hartford, CT and have been an active member of the CT Council on Adoption for over 15 years. For the record, I also recently completed 34 years of social work service with the CT Department of Children and Families having retired as of October 1, 2011.

I speak to you this afternoon with the knowledge, expertise and experiences acquired from my 34 year career with CT DCF as well as from the same gained from my Council membership where I have participated in ongoing adoption-related trainings over a period of many years on various legal and social issues involving both public and private agency adoptions. I am offering this testimony today of my own free will with no financial benefit to myself or the Council.

The CT Council on Adoption was formed in 1976 by a group of public agency and private agency adoption professionals and other CT concerned citizens to promote good and effective adoption practices in the State of CT. The Council membership also extends to birth parents, adoptive families, adult adoptees, therapists and CT Court personnel to facilitate the latest information-sharing and training on various adoption-related issues and to foster cooperation among the public, private, and volunteer sectors in CT to serve children in need or permanent families. Some of these trainings have been held here at the Legislative Office Building. The Council also has and continues to act as an advocacy group on adoption-related legislative matters in the State of CT.

While I can support the purpose of the proposed legislation as stated in S. B. 192 "to decrease the length of time between TPR and finalization", I am seriously questioning at this time whether allowing for this alternate venue from the Probate Court to also include the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters would accomplish that stated purpose and more so whether it would be in the best interests of the child and his/her adoptive family to do so.

I would like to raise the following concerns and questions given what is known about the already stretched CT Superior Court for Juvenile Matters court dockets and their judicial staff who handle both child protection and delinquency matters.

1.) Does or will the SC-JM clerks have the necessary staffing, expertise and capacity to receive and review the extensive adoption finalization packets, issue the proper notices to the various parties, prepare Adoption Decrees in a timely manner and maintain the sealed adoption records as required by CT Statute? At present, adoptive families leave the Probate Court Hearing with a signed Adoption Decree "in hand" on the day of the hearing as the child is legally their child and no longer in CT DCF custody and this documentation is critical in applying for a new social security card, signing for medical treatment and other matters. In my past work experience, there was frequently a delay of months between a hearing in the CT SC-JM and for parties to receive a copy of a court order.

2.) What about the completion and forwarding of the VS-51, Record of Adoption, to the CT Health Department Bureau of Vital Records for the issuance of a new birth certificate for the child? This would now be the responsibility of the SC-JM clerks .

3.) If the TPR was contested, how will the SC-JM address any potential safety and/or confidentiality risk factors by bringing the child and his/her adoptive family back into the same SC-JM where TPR was granted? These court houses are open to the public.

4.) From a mere physical aspect, how will SC-JM's accommodate the child/ren, his/her adoptive family and any guests as these waiting rooms are frequently overcrowded on hearing days and lack any privacy? The adoption finalization is a special ceremony for the child and his/her adoptive family and often attended by other family members who have come to be part of the child's life. The Probate Courts have done an exceptional job in these hearings by setting aside ample time in their schedules for these special ceremonies and many have opened their courtrooms for National Adoption Day in November.

I sincerely question if passing legislation at this time of budgetary cutbacks to allow for the change of venue from the Probate Court to the SC-JM is an appropriate response to the stated purpose of the proposed legislation or would it result in jeopardizing the integrity of an adoption finalization if the above concerns have not been fully addressed.

Please be aware that considerable work has been done in recent years by the Probate Court Administrator's Office in providing trainings on finalization procedures to the CT Probate Court Judges and clerks especially those at the Children's Regional Probate Courts. Who will be responsible for that training and oversight with the 12 to 13 SC-JM's across the state?

To work toward achieving the stated purpose of the proposed S.B. 192, I would urge the DCF Commissioner to pursue the following:

Conduct a thorough review of the reasons for the current delays in finalization. Some delays may be beyond the control of DCF or the Probate Court as in interstate placements. In my past experience, a finalization hearing in Probate Court can be set down as early as 10 days but within 30 days once a completed packet has been submitted to the Probate Court. This includes the three completed Probate Court forms , the

Adoption Study, DCF-337/DCF338 forms, VS-51 form, Certified Birth Certificate and TPR Orders. This same information would be required whether filing is done in the Probate Court or SC-JM.

*Reallocate DCF staffing and increase ongoing trainings with social workers, supervisors and their managers so they become more familiar and experienced with the necessary knowledge and skills in order to properly complete the actions required for a child's adoption finalization in a timely manner. At the same time, DCF staff schedules need to be prioritized in order to meet the finalization timeframes.

*Utilize PPSP agreements with private Child-Placing Agencies to help expedite the finalization process for both in and out of state pre-adoptive placements.

*Assure that staffing in the DCF Subsidy Unit is sufficient as all adoption subsidy requests need to be reviewed for Commissioner's approval before they can be finalized and further to assure that SSI has been determined for any medically fragile children for potential Federal IV-E reimbursement.

In conclusion, the finalization of an adoption should be done in the best interests of the child and his/her adoptive family. I would ask the Committee to carefully review these concerns and assure that both DCF and the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters fully understand and address these concerns with you as part of your consideration for passage. The Probate Courts in CT have devoted many years to improving the integrity of their system to meet the needs of the child and his/her adoptive family and no less should be expected of the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today and I would be willing to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



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